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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 ADDIS ABABA 000314

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIAN COUNTRYSIDE: SUPPRESSING DISSENT,
CREATING FEAR

REF: A. 2008 ADDIS 667
[1](#)B. 2008 ADDIS 1554
[1](#)C. ADDIS 258

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) A four-day visit to Western Oromiya by PolOff revealed a political environment that suppressed dissent, created fear, and clearly focused on eliminating any opportunity for political dialogue with the opposition. Landlords refused to rent out office space to opposition parties, and opposition party officials could not meet with their constituents. Opposition party members and officials feared speaking to PolOff and those who did were interrogated and threatened after doing so. The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party dominates politics completely, and several community members reported that it is difficult to secure a job or receive food aid without being a member of the party. Opposition party members and officials from Gimbi, Nekempt, Dembi Dollo, and Ambo towns consistently recounted the same story of harassment, detention, and intimidation by the government. One local administrator claimed that his relationship with opposition parties was friendly, but opposition party representatives reported to PolOff that there was no interaction between them and the government. The separation of power between the administration, judiciary, police, and the National Electoral Board (NEB) is rapidly consolidating with power concentrated in the executive branch. Local administrators said that the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) activity has decreased recently and is now "almost ok" thanks to the coordination between federal police and military forces. The Embassy strongly believes that a coordinated international approach is needed. Otherwise, the 2010 national elections will see no political space for divergent political views. End Summary.

If You're Not With EPRDF, You're Against Them

[1](#)2. (C) Opposition party representatives reported to PolOff that the local government uses coercive tactics to recruit party members, such as withholding food aid, withholding fertilizer, selectively granting microfinance loans, denying/revoking business licenses, and refusing to issue ID cards to people unless they fill in the party registration form. The Ethiopian Government (GoE), via government-controlled organizations, is the only fertilizer distributor, and it reportedly withholds fertilizer from farmers who are suspected of supporting the opposition.

Local administrators also aggressively try to convert opposition officials/supporters by offering jobs, loans, and other benefits. Those who refuse to convert are harassed and intimidated, and family members are pressured to convince the dissenter to leave town. Dissenters have reported being followed by police, losing their jobs (civil service employees and teachers), and being beaten by police.

13. (C) Two days after opposition party officials met with PolOff in Gimbi, the officials received a letter summoning them to the Zonal Administrators Office where they were chastised for speaking to foreigners and threatened with losing their teaching jobs. One Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM) member who met with Poloff was followed by local police before Poloff even left Gimbi. Another opposition party member reported that after speaking to EmbOffs in October 2007, the government terminated his employment as a teacher. He did eventually get it back, but only after taking the case to court. One of PolOff's conversations with an opposition party member abruptly ended when three local government officials sat at a neighboring table. The opposition party member grew worried and requested to end the meeting immediately. Oromo People's Congress (OPC) representatives in Nekempt reported that harassment of OPC leaders and supporters intensified after the Ambassador's February 2008 visit (Ref. A). Opposition party members reported being followed and occasionally interrogated by local police, kebele administrators, and local militia.

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Opposition: There is no Justice, There is no Democracy

14. (C) After three years of harassment and intimidation it was palpable from the political atmosphere that the government has succeeded in instilling fear in opposition party officials/members and the population at large. People are commonly arrested under charges of conspiring with the OLF, despite the fact that every local administrator we spoke with reported that OLF activity had decreased significantly in the past year. An Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) representative reported that at least 40 people have been arrested/beaten and accused of being members of the OLF in Western Oromiya in the past year. He suspected the number was much higher but said that many people do not report incidents due to fear of reprisal. On October 30, 2008, ten people were arrested in Nekempt under allegations of being affiliated with the OLF. Three were EHRCO members, one a lawyer, and the rest were teachers, some with no political affiliation. After 26 days in detention, they were released on a 2,000 birr (USD 200) bail and the court unofficially dropped their case when police failed to produce evidence. In another incident, a bar owner was arrested after someone walked by and threw OLF flyers into his bar. He was accused of colluding with the OLF. Another OFDM official with whom we spoke was arrested and spent three weeks in jail before he was released without charge. One opposition leader did not come to meet us out of fear of retribution. One young OPC member told PolOff that he fully expected to be picked up by police after meeting with us, but, he said, "that is my life." He spent the past three years in jail after being arrested for inciting violence after the 2005 elections and since his release three months ago he has been jailed five times.

15. (C) OPC representatives in Nekempt said that the political space has increasingly narrowed since the 2005 elections, and that they currently are prevented from contacting their constituents, their supporters are harassed, and the local government forced them out of their office just before the local elections in April 2008. First, local police surrounded their office and arrested anyone who visited the office. When they refused to leave, local administrators

pressured the landlord to evict them. No other landlords are willing to rent to opposition parties for fear of harassment.

In Ambo, local police arrested two OPC representatives when they refused to vacate the party office. Police then ransacked the office, and it is now closed. In Dembi Dollo, the OFDM rented an office from the bank, but nine months ago the bank evicted them for no reason. They can't find any other landlords willing to rent to them. Only the OFDM in Gimbi has an office, but its location in the center of town makes people afraid to come.

¶6. (C) Several opposition party representatives expressed extreme frustration and hinted that if the 2010 elections went the same as the 2008 local elections, they would give up. An OPC representative said, "we are not even a party anymore. We can't meet with constituents, have an office, or express ourselves through the media. At a practical level there is no democracy." Opposition parties admitted to PolOff that they are in self-preservation mode, as they are unable to conduct activities but trying to survive nonetheless. An OPC representative stated, "We have tried our best to play by the rules, but there are no rules." An OFDM official said that if the 2010 elections are not free and fair, he does not think there will be a popular uprising because the GoE and its machinery are so powerful that they will suppress resistance. One OPC representative highlighted Nekempt town's recently acquired anti-riot water tanker as evidence of the GoE's preparations to suppress political upheaval. If police and security back off and allow opposition parties to operate freely, opposition parties said they will begin to prepare for the 2010 elections. OPC representatives said that their platform is to respect the constitution and the mandate of the people, liberalize the economy by creating incentives for investors, and privatize land ownership. An OFDM member cited lack of self-determination, corruption of officials, and increasing food prices as the major issues that affect peoples' lives in Oromiya.

EPRDF: Winning Hearts and Minds

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¶7. (C) Zonal administrators in Nekempt, Gimbi, Dembi Dollo, and Ambo all reported that they are working hard to improve the lives of their citizens, and really listening to their constituents so that they can respond to people's needs. Local cadres cited paving roads, refurbishing hospitals, and building schools as proof that they are committed to development, and that they learned their lesson from the 2005 elections when "the people punished us but not giving us their vote, but we are now winning hearts and minds." Administrators reported that they communicate with the public through forums, trainings, seminars, and welfare associations.

¶8. (C) When asked how the ruling party facilitates the rights of other political parties, administrators responded that it has been frustrating because in the 2005 elections there were so many "misunderstandings and challenges." They said that opposition parties engage in anti-government activities, do not respect the constitution and rule of law, and are not sufficiently competent. Further, they claim that opposition parties use false evidence to recruit members and have lost support in the community. One administrator admitted that the opposition parties were not fully equipped or capable to challenge the government. In Gimbi and Nekempt, the zonal administrator claimed that he works together with opposition parties and has a friendly relationship with them. He added that he does not understand why but opposition parties always wait until one to two months before elections to start campaigning. PolOff asked why this might be and the administrator responded that the opposition is not organized, committed, or competent. Further, the administrator said that many opposition candidates were criminals and the

government had no choice but to arrest them.

¶9. (C) Local administrators claimed that they were open to communication with all constituencies, including opposition parties. All opposition party representatives said that the local administration was unresponsive and antagonistic. PolOff encouraged opposition party representatives to attempt to increase engagement with the local administration and carefully document the outcome. Several of the local administrators with whom we spoke averted eye contact throughout the meetings. Opposition party members call the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO, a member party within the EPRDF coalition) the Oromo Deaf People's Association, explaining that the local cadres are possibly even more afraid of the EPRDF than the opposition because the consequences of breaking loyalty to the EPRDF are grave.

Ruling Party and State "One in the Same"

¶10. (C) In speaking with zonal administrators, it became clear that the line between the OPDO and the government is blurry to almost non-existent. One representative said that when he visits woredas and delivers fertilizer to farmers "the farmers will remember that OPDO gave them fertilizer." He then asked rhetorically, "has the OFDM ever given them fertilizer? They will remember this when it's time to vote."

After 2005, the EPRDF started forcing public servants to become party members. One elder in Nekempt had worked in the local administration for 28 years, and three years ago was given the choice to become an EPRDF member or quit (he quit and became a dairy farmer). Another elder worked for the Ministry of Education for 33 years and was forced to register with the EPRDF or leave his post. Both elders said that working under the EPRDF was worse than working under either Haile Selassie or Mengistu regimes.

¶11. (C) There is very little separation of powers at the local level, and the police and judiciary largely receive orders from the executive branch. One opposition official said that the local administration, the police, and the judiciary are "one in the same and operate as a mafia." In addition, some opposition members said that the NEB is also colluding with the government to suppress the opposition. For example, when an OPC candidate was refused registration at the kebele level, he filed a complaint with the NEB. The NEB sent the case to Addis Ababa, where several months passed before the NEB decided that it was not an electoral issue (but rather a legal one) and dropped the case. In Ambo a student who was denied a kebele ID card took the matter to

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court. After three months the court finally issued a letter instructing the kebele administration to issue the ID card. However, the kebele administration still refused to issue the card. The local administrator in Ambo claimed he was not aware of the issue. In another example, the OFDM in Dembi Dollo tried unsuccessfully to register a candidate for the by-elections in April 2008. The NEB sent the candidate to the kebele administration to obtain documentation verifying that he is in fact a current resident. The kebele administration refused to issue the documentation and threatened to set fire to the candidate's house if he continued to pursue the matter. The next day the house of another OFDM candidate was burned down.

On the Economic Front

¶12. (U) A representative from the East Wellega Zone Administration touted the development progress made in the past two years, highlighting road construction, building schools and wells, and installing telephone lines. The Administration is also trying to encourage investments to the

area. For example, the Pakistani company HSM will build a sugar factory in the next two years, creating 10,000 jobs. Western Oromiya is a coffee-producing region, with 90% of the land suitable for growing coffee. The West Wellega Zone Administration plans to transfer and plant 200 million coffee plants in the next year. People are beginning to evade paying taxes by selling the coffee on the black market to Jimma, where it eventually comes to Addis Ababa. Interlocutors complained that lack of flights to Western Oromiya is a key problem and slowing the economic development of the region.

EHRCO on Ethnic Clash in Asosa

¶13. (C) EHRCO was able to investigate the clash in Asosa between Gumuz and Oromo farmers that happened in May 2008 (Ref. B) and documented the incident for one week immediately after it occurred. EHRCO found that 113 people were confirmed dead (84 Oromos, 29 Gumuz), 63 wounded, and 27,000 displaced. What began as a land dispute between two farmers spiraled into a larger conflict exposing the pent up anger between the two groups. When local police could not hold the well-armed Gumuz fighters, the Federal Police came and arrested 117 people between May 19-21. They are currently being held at Kaliti prison in Addis Ababa and charged with genocide. An EHRCO representative said that the situation in the disputed region is stable but fragile. A local administrator in Nekempt said that leaders have been selected in the kebeles to study the conflict and determine how it can be prevented in the future. However, he noted that the root of the problem is poverty/lack of resources and that this needs to be addressed for a long-term solution. Local elders claimed that the government incited the violence by sending in an "agent provocateur," a Tigraian investor who owned land in the disputed area and was caught carrying arms to the Gumez people. The elders said that the disputed area is a hideout for the OLF and the government wants to get Oromos out of the area. An EHRCO representative reported that while the government does not prevent them from conducting investigations, the government also does not support their work by disclosing documents, etc. The representative said that government security forces follow EHRCO employees and try to hide/cover up evidence before they can get to it.

Comment

¶14. (C) Since over 85% of Ethiopia's population lives in rural areas, any chance of free and fair elections must address political space at the local level. If the ruling party and GoE's hard-core tactics do not abate as the 2010 elections approach, Embassy Addis Ababa assesses that by next spring the playing field will be so tilted that a free and fair multi-party election will be impossible. Post strongly believes that we, in coordination with other donors, must take a strong approach with the GoE leadership, following on the Acting A/S Phil Carter's markers on political space (Ref. C). We will also re-echo that message and continue site

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visits by Poloffs to monitor if and how the political playing field is being leveled at the local level. A strongly coordinated approach is needed now, 16 months before the elections, so that opposition parties have time to organize and campaign effectively. Since there are serious doubts that the NEB is impartial, post urges Washington to insist that Ethiopia allow international election observers as well.
YAMAMOTO